

# Uncovering an Indiana Treasure . . .



## The Word “Hoosier”

*“Those unfortunate souls who, for some reason, live elsewhere may continue to speculate as to the origin of our name; and we Hoosiers will continue to enjoy their doing so.”* – Indiana Governor Robert D. Orr, 1987

So just what is a “Hoosier?” To tell you the truth, no one really knows the origin of the nickname. We “Hoosiers” are something totally unique and special to this state known as Indiana, and there is a certain amount of pride that goes along with being a “Hoosier.” Indiana University History Professor James Madison points out, “The popularity of the moniker is due to the fact that Hoosiers really believe they are different, a distinctive culture and place, and that they are proud of that culture and place.”

Then there are those who feel that being a “Hoosier” is not a compliment. In fact, some Indiana natives have said that they dropped the term after moving out of the state, finding that their new friends associated the term “Hoosier” with backwardness, a rural character - sort of ‘redneck.’ Regardless, most will still agree that the word “Hoosier” is a historical term traditionally associated with the state – even if they currently aren’t comfortable with it. So how do Hoosiers define themselves? It usually involves a list of values: traditional, conservative, family-oriented, relatively self-sufficient, hard working, a lack of pretense and a powerful sense of community.

Putting aside all of the haggling, most historians agree that the term came into general usage in the 1830’s. John Finley of Richmond, Indiana wrote a poem entitled “The Hoosier’s Nest” that was used as the “Carrier’s Address” of the Indianapolis Journal in 1833. It was widely copied throughout the country and even abroad. That same year at the Jackson Day dinner in Indianapolis, John W. Davis, Speaker of the Indiana House of Representatives, offered “The Hoosier State of Indiana” as a toast. And in August, former Indiana Governor James B. Ray announced that he intended to publish a newspaper, “The Hoosier,” in Greencastle, Indiana. Evidently, the term had to have been sufficiently familiar to people, at least in oral traditions, prior to the 1830’s for them to understand the term and its connotations by that time.

The earliest recorded written use of the term comes from a letter dated February 24, 1826, that James Curtis of Holt County, Missouri, sent to his uncle, Joseph Beeler of Indianapolis. Curtis wrote: “The Indiana hoosiers that came out last fall is settled from 2 to 4 miles of us.” Another early written record of the word comes from a diary entry dated July 14, 1827. The diarist relates an anecdote about a squatter who gave a false alarm that Indians were coming, so that he could ride to Crawfordsville and enter a claim for his land ahead of the speculators he had seen looking it over. Successful in his deceit, he boasted: “There is a Yankee trick for you - - done up by a Hoosier.”

Maybe it is part of the “mystery” of being a “Hoosier,” something that really has no true definition, which appeals to the state’s natives. How we define it, own up to it and mock it is a fascinating picture of ourselves. The legends we have

created to explain it are more Hoosier than reality ever could be. Here is a list of some of the more popular theories:

- When a visitor hailed a pioneer cabin in Indiana, the settler would respond, “Who’s yere?” From this response, Indiana became the “Who’s yere” or Hoosier state.
- Indiana river men were so spectacularly successful in trouncing or “hushing” their adversaries in brawling that they became known as “hushers” and eventually Hoosiers.

- There was once a contractor named Samuel Hoosier who worked on the canal at the Falls of the Ohio. He preferred to hire laborers from the Indiana side of the river to those from Kentucky. These men were given the nickname “Hoosier’s men,” and eventually all Indianans were called Hoosiers.
- Indiana Governor Joseph Wright believed the word came from an Indian word for corn, “hoosa.” Indiana flat boatmen taking corn to New Orleans came to be known as “hoosa men” or Hoosiers.
- The Hoosier Poet, James Whitcomb Riley, offered this theory: The early Hoosier settlers were vicious fighters who gouged, scratched and bit off noses and ears. This was so common an occurrence that a settler coming into a tavern the morning after a fight and seeing an ear on the floor would touch it with his toe and casually ask, “Whose ear?”
- Historian Jacob Piatt Dunn, Jr., theorized that the word “Hoosier” was frequently used in many parts of the South in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for woodsmen or rough hill people. He traced the word back to “hoozer” in the Cumberland dialect of England. “Hoo” meaning high or hill, and “hoozer” meant a hill dweller or highlander. Immigrants from Cumberland, England, settled in the south in what would be called the “Cumberland Mountains” and their descendants brought the name with them when they settled in the hills of southern Indiana.
- There was also a case put forth for “Black Harry” Hoosier, an African-American Methodist evangelist. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, he was considered to be the most widely known black preacher of his time, and the greatest circuit rider of his day.

However the term got its start, the word “Hoosier” probably gained increased momentum during the Civil War, when state battalions often razed one another with nicknames. The soldiers from Indiana became known as “Hoosiers,” but other states were given some very interesting names as well. Would you rather be known as “Beetheads” (Texas), “Lizards” (Alabama), “Bug-eaters” (Nebraska), “Weasels” (South Carolina), “Leatherheads” (Pennsylvania), “Suckers” (Illinois), “Clam Catchers” (New Jersey), or probably the worst – “Pukes” (Missouri)? Some more mild nicknames that have stuck with their states include “Tarheels” (North Carolina), and “Buckeyes” (Ohio). Compared to many of the states, the nickname “Hoosier” doesn’t seem that bad.

Whatever you choose to believe as the origin of the word “Hoosier” you can be sure that someone else will have a totally different theory on the subject. Most would agree that the term probably had some sort of negative connotation originally. However, like certain religious groups such as the Quakers and the Methodists who welcomed a once derisive term, the word “Hoosier” has been adopted by its native state and embraced to mean something unique and special. And no one will probably ever know the true origin of the name.

### **Additional Resources:**

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Clifford, Eth, Richard E. Kirk, and James N. Rogers. *Living Indiana History: A Story of People from Many Lands*. Indianapolis, Indiana: David-Stewart Publishing Company, Inc., 1973.

Dunn, Jr., Jacob Piatt. “The Word Hoosier.” *Indiana Magazine of History*. Volume 7, number 2. June, 1911

Graf, Jeffrey. *The Word Hoosier*. Bloomington: Reference Department, Indiana University Libraries, 8 Apr, 2003. [www.indiana.edu/~librcsd/internet/extra/hoosier.html](http://www.indiana.edu/~librcsd/internet/extra/hoosier.html)

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